

# METRO PICTURES

Simmons, Gary. "Forward Ever, Backward Never," *WalkerArt.org* (January 20, 2017).

## Artist Op-Eds



Gary Simmons, *Everforward*, 1992.

I grew up in a West Indian household, a first-generation child of immigrants. The values of honor and respect were paramount in forming who my sister and I are, as my parents believed these qualities shaped one's character—something that is extremely important to any working-class immigrant. We were constantly hearing, "We came to this country for you to have XYZ," but at the same time we were—and are—very proud of where we came from. Like many immigrant kids, our parents worked multiple jobs in order to provide for us. I'll never forget what that meant to my sister and I, and what my parents had to go through to help us become who we are today.

West Indians love to flip a verse. Often my grandmother would say, "Walk good." And when she would call me from a different room and I would say, "I'm coming," she would always respond with, "Stop coming and COME!"

"Forward ever, backward never" is a phrase that, for as long as I can remember, most West Indians not only used but also lived by. It was coined by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first prime minister and president, but was adopted and used by many in the Islands. On one level, its meaning and implication are obvious, but it has a deeper significance to folks from the West Indies.





Gary Simmons, *Us & Them*, 1991.

Then came President Bill Clinton, and with him came the possibility of change—and hope that attention might become focused on voices that had been relegated to the sidelines for so long. Artists reacted, and installation and video artists had a platform now that the economy was starting to recover. The focus was on immersing the viewer in an environment or experience. The art market began to recover as a new Wall Street collector base entered the scene. Careers began to be made in the auction rooms. But, ultimately, with any good comes the bad: sadly, as the market began to recover, interest in politically based work ebbed. The recovery and spike in the market continued throughout the Bush era, prolonging this sidelining of work that addressed issues of race and difference, despite its continued relevance.

The last eight years have been an incredible period in history. But, unfortunately, with the comfort of a thoughtful, caring president came a certain kind of complacency. President Barack Obama and his administration took office against an extremely difficult landscape: the country was at odds with itself, the economy had major problems, and xenophobia was prevalent. Obama is not just a president: he is an icon of hope and of the potential for good. He took on a country in crisis with grace, eloquence, and equanimity. Now, eight years later, we have become not only accustomed to but also reliant on his perspicacity and calm demeanor, for when Barack spoke, the future was inclusive and hopeful. Despite his positive influence, there are still unresolved issues of difference lurking under the surface. We still have police brutality, racism, and xenophobia. Our recent election cycle gave a microphone to some of the darkest voices we have heard in a long time, voices that speak feelings that have clearly been germinating for many years. People are unnerved. Wounds that never healed have been reopened. The new commander-in-chief must recognize the volatility of these raw wounds and stop blowing hot air onto already scalding coals, for his is a dangerous and divisive voice.

As Michelle Obama so eloquently said, “When they go low, we go high.” Looking back at *Everforward* today, I hear echoes from the past. A lot of the issues I was trying to address then are just as relevant today. We need to keep looking forward and learning from the past, not reliving it. When I try to find the positive in our uncertain political future, I find it in the hope that artists will again use their work to give voice to those who are silenced and less fortunate. As Barack Obama said in his farewell speech, “If something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing.” Or as my grandmother used to tell me, “Walk good.”